

CHRISTMAS VIGIL AT THE BASILICA OF THE NATIVITY (2016)

The feast of Christmas was celebrated by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem on Thursday, 25th of December 2015/7th of January 2016, in the town where our Lord Jesus Christ was born in the flesh, namely Jerusalem and the Grotto of the Nativity.

B' On feast-day

The feast of Christmas was celebrated as a night-long service of Matins and divine Liturgy at the Basilica and the Grotto of the Nativity.

At 22:30 pm of Wednesday, Christmas Eve, the 24th of December 2015/6th of January 2016, the Service commenced with the entrance of the Orthodox from the internal south gate of the Basilica, known as the Gate of the Baptistery, as Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias officiated during Matins at the Katholikon of the Basilica before the iconostasis.

His Beatitude Theophilos, Patriarch of Jerusalem, went on to officiate at Matins.

Before the Beautiful Gate of the Holy Bema, the Patriarch and Primates descended to the Holy Cave, led by His Beatitude, flanked by His Excellency the Palestinian President, Mr Mahmoud Abbas, and government officials, and by the Greek Consul-General to Jerusalem, Mr Georgios Zacharoudiakis and representatives of the King of Jordan.

Upon entrance to the Grotto, the excerpt on the Nativity from Luke's Gospel was read in Greek and Arabic, after which, the message of the Patriarch was read in Greek by His Eminence

Aristarchos, Archbishop of Constantina:

Today Bethlehem welcomes

the one who sits for ever by the Father,

today angels godly praise

the born infant,

glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace,

good will to people.

(Idiomelon of Christmas Matins)

The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Orthodox Church of Christ across the world celebrates today as it pastorally declares to its members and peacefully attests to the world a marvellous and splendid event that transcends every human concept, perception and power.

This event is the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. It is the realization of the nations' expectations. God, in His infinite love, oversaw the years of man's ignorance, forgave his committed sins and transgressions and invited him to a new divine life for which he had been made from the very beginning, "And the Lord hath sent redemption to His people" (Psalm 110, 9).

Redemption is the Only-Begotten Son and Word of God. "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as Sons"(Galatians 4, 4) according to the Apostle Paul. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and out of His fullness we all received grace in place of grace already given" (John 1, 14&16), according to the Evangelist of love.

The incarnation of the Logos, His investment in human flesh,

was not performed in compliance with the laws of nature as – *“where God wishes so, the order of nature is overcome”* – but according to the will of the Father, a Holy Spirit descended upon Mariam, the Virgin daughter of Nazareth, and she conceived the Son of God as man. The Son of God became the Son of man too, he was incarnate and personified. Mariam bore the Messiah, Christ, in the flesh. The event took place in this town of Bethlehem, at this plain Cavern under the reign of Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus Octavianus.

This *“strange and paradoxical mystery”* is indeed God’s loving and healing descent towards man. Through Jesus Christ, God *“descended into the lower parts of the earth”* (Ephes. 4, 9) so that man may be restored to the godlike beauty before the fall, and rise to the heavens. According to St Cyril of Alexandria, *“God, who exists outside the ecumene, has come to it and made the human soul alike so that it be cleansed from sin, and He took on the human form so that man be made a citizen of heaven”*.

To this mystery God had called for accomplices, helpers and witnesses. His accomplice was the ever-virgin Mary so that she might lend her flesh to His Son. Joseph was her helper and protector, the one who had accompanied Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, then Mary and the divine infant from Bethlehem to Egypt. His witnesses had been the magi, wise kings of the Persians, led by a star, and the simple shepherds dwelling in the adjacent town of the Shepherds. God had also called as witnesses angels from heaven, proclaiming the mystery with the hymn *“Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace, good will to people”* (Luke 2, 14).

This angelic hymn proclaimed God’s good will to men, *“and through Him to reconcile to himself all things”* (Colossians 1, 20) and *“to unite all things in Christ”* (Ephesians 1, 10), the Incarnate and Personified, *“because in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the deity in bodily form”* (Colossians 2, 9), *“so that in Christ they shall be brought to fullness”* (Colossians

2, 10) and *"they are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household"* (Ephesians 2, 19), in His body of the Church, *"of which He is the head"* (Colossians 1, 18).

Opposite this mystery of man's divinization by grace where he is "co-heir" (Romans 8, 17) with the Incarnate Jesus Christ, men have taken various stances. Some, as the magi and the shepherds, rejoice upon the angelic proclamation and venerate the born infant. Others, as Herod the maniac, an imitator of the devil and killer of men, doubt and question and uncritically and indiscriminately chase away men from their paternal homes, violently and *en masse*, persecuting and murdering innocent children, youth, old, in contempt of human life made by God. To escape Herod's mania, on divine encouragement, Christ fled to Egypt, demonstrating through his flight the vulnerability of His human body which, after all, would endure the holy passion on the cross before *"annulling the vulnerability with His resurrection from the dead"* according to St Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Hideous incidents of violence at the expense of Christians and other innocent fellow humans in the region of the Middle East and across the world are denounced by the Church of Christ. The Church denounces war and violence, advocating peace for those near and those far. Though persecuted, it does not persecute but prays for its persecutors. Through Baptism it accepts man in its body, the body of Christ, and blesses and cultivates and formulates man as a peaceful person believing that *"blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God"* (Matthew 5, 9).

The word of peace, justice, conciliation and exchange and the beginning of God's reign on earth, already experienced within the Church, is declared on this universal feast of Christianity by the Mother of Churches from the Sacred Cavern and the Holy Manger in the Basilica of the Nativity, preserved through the centuries as the apple of the eye, with wishes to

the congregation within its jurisdiction, residing in the Palestinian state, for the blessing, strengthening and grace of the Lord of peace and justice, the Angel of God's great will, the Incarnate, Personified and Born by the Virgin in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, and with a supplication for the recommencement and fruition of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians for the final and just resolution of the Palestinian problem, under the experienced guidance of His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas-Abu Mazen, honouring our feast today, whom we thank and for whom we wish several happy returns in health, safety and progress, prosperity and complete independence of the Palestinian people.

In the Holy Town of Bethlehem, **CHRISTMAS 2015**

Ardently blesser in the Lord,

THEOPHILOS III

Patriarch of Jerusalem

The address was read in Arabic by Protopresbyter f. Issa Mousleh.

At this point, the Palestinian President left, and the service continued with a supplication, veneration at the Star and the Manger by His Beatitude and Primates in the presence of the Greek Consul-General to Jerusalem, Mr Georgios Zacharoudiakis.

On the conclusion of the Service at the Cave, the Patriarchal Entourage exited through the northern Gate of the Grotto and walked in straight line from the chapel used by the Armenians, where a procession thrice began around the Basilica, as Archimandrite Aristovoulos sang in Greek and the Church of the Nativity Choir by Mr Lawrence Samour sang in Arabic.

Once Matins was completed, the divine Liturgy began at the Holy Bema, led by His Beatitude. Co-officiating were Metropolitan Isychios of Kapitolias, Archbishops Dorotheos of

Avila, Aristarchos of Constantina, Philoumenos of Pella, Hagiotaphite Hieromonks and clerics visiting from other Orthodox Churches, Archdeacon Evlogios and Hierodeacons Markos and Anastasios. Archimandrite Aristovoulos sang in Greek and the Choir of the Church of the Nativity in Arabic, in the presence of a great crowd of locals and pilgrims from Greece, Russia, Romania and other Orthodox countries.

The feast was concluded with Communion and the distribution of *antidoron* at 3:30 am.

At the Cave, the divine Liturgy was led by Metropolitan Joachim of former Zambia.

The Patriarchal Entourage was then hosted to festive lunch by Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan.

After receiving spiritual and material food, and extending thanks to God for the celebration of Christmas, the Church of Jerusalem left Bethlehem for Jerusalem.

From the Secretariat-General

<http://youtu.be/NalQbhd1cAc>

http://youtu.be/ypZ9MRV_T80

<http://youtu.be/8bU40EZKhZA>

